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WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Pan-European Regional Ministerial Meeting

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Round Table

Building a Gender-sensitive Information Society

Message by

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In the Millennium Declaration, world leaders reaffirmed gender equality as one of the fundamental goals in the twenty-first century. They resolved to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.

As the Pan-European Regional Ministerial Conference meets in preparation for the World Summit on the Information Society, major attention will be devoted to national actions and regional strategies, as well as ways to expand the benefits of the information society to all members of society. This event is therefore a critical opportunity for ensuring that the gender dimensions of all aspects of the information society are adequately understood, and reflected in policy decisions, the regulatory framework and in partnership approaches that will support an inclusive information society of the future.

Women are increasingly taking advantage of ICT in all spheres of life, thus confirming that ICT can be a tool to enhance the economic, political and social empowerment of women and promote gender equality. At the same time, a “gender divide” within the digital divide is apparent, reflected not only in the lower numbers of women users of ICT, compared to men, but also in the persistence of gender-specific structural inequalities that constitute barriers to access. In particular, persistent inequalities between women and men at all levels of decision-making constitute serious constraints to women’s participation in shaping the role of ICT as a tool for development. As ICT are reshaping the world of work and commerce, learning, governance, and interactions between different sectors and groups in society, ICT may also perpetuate existing gender-based inequalities in opportunities and resources. They may also create new forms of inequality between women and men.

It is thus essential to focus on the gender dimensions of the digital divide, not only to prevent adverse impact of the digital revolution on gender equality and to enhance women’s equitable access to the benefits of ICT, but also to ensure that ICT can become

a central tool for women's empowerment and the promotion of gender equality. Policies need to ensure that the gender perspectives of ICT access and use are fully addressed so that ICT actively promote gender equality, and ensure that gender-based disadvantages are not created or perpetuated.

The gender dimensions of ICT policies, e-government, e-learning – some of the themes that are being discussed at this Conference - need to be clarified. The gender perspectives of access, applications, user needs, language, and tools need to be explicitly identified so that adequate responses can be developed. Any vision of a common, inclusive and participatory information society must necessarily be built on the expectations, contributions, needs and priorities of all stakeholders.

The potential of information and communication technologies for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women is recognized. In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women, called for the empowerment of women through enhancing their skills, knowledge, access to and use of information technologies. In June 2000, the twenty-third special session of the United Nations General Assembly highlighted the increased opportunities created by ICT for women but it also stressed that poverty, lack of access and opportunities, illiteracy, including computer illiteracy, and language barriers prevented some women from benefiting from the full potential of ICT. Steps were proposed to ensure women's equal access to ICT-related education, training and entrepreneurship opportunities, and equal access as producers and consumers of ICT through public and private partnerships.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, at its session in March 2003, will consider the role of ICT as an instrument for the empowerment of women. The outcome of those deliberations will serve as an input to the World Summit on the Information Society. In preparation of the work of the Commission, the Division for the Advancement of Women, in cooperation with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the United Nations ICT Task Force Secretariat, is organizing an expert group meeting on this topic next week in the Republic of Korea. An online discussion on the same subject was held in June and July, and the report of that dialogue is available (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/>).

Today's round table on building a gender-sensitive information society aims to raise awareness, identify good practices, and establish a platform for dialogue among stakeholders. As a catalytic event for highlighting the gender dimensions of the information society, the round table should convey a clear message to the Pan-European Regional Ministerial Conference that the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women is a societal responsibility, and as such, has to be an integral and explicit part of all deliberations. Without attention to gender dimensions, ICT will not achieve their potential for serving human development needs.

I wish you success in your deliberations.